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ABSTRACT

It is often suggested that black girls may have a somewhat harder time adjusting to desegregated schools than black boys but that just the opposite is true for white children. This conclusion is based on a relatively small number of studies which have focused on assessing the impact of desegregation on factors such as students' self-esteem or their college aspirations. Very little research has been conducted on students' reactions to and perceptions of their experiences in interracial schools. In the research reported here, 20 randomly selected sixth grade black and white students were interviewed about their reactions to their school near the beginning and the end of their first year of desegregated education. Both black and white students felt very positively about the "magnet" school they attended and about relationships between students there. However, 2 x 2 repeated measures analyses of variance showed that, as predicted, black males and white females were considerably more positive about their experiences than were black females and white males. (Author)

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Who Likes Desegregated Schools? The Effect of Sex and Race on Students' Attitudes

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ABSTRACT

It is often suggested that black girls may have a somewhat harder time adjusting to desegregated schools than black boys but that just the opposite is true for white children (Carithers, 1970; St. John, 1975). This conclusion is based on a relatively small number of studies which have focused on assessing the impact of desegregation on factors such as students' self-esteem or their college aspirations. Very little research has been conducted on students' reactions to and perceptions of their experiences in interracial schools. In the research reported here, 20 randomly selected sixth grade black and white students were interviewed about their reactions to their school near the beginning and the end of their first year of desegregated education. Both black and white students felt very positively about the "magnet" school they attended and about relationships between students there. However, 2 x 2 repeated measures analyses of variance showed that, as predicted, black males and white females were considerably more positive about their experiences than were black females and white males.

There is evidence that school desegregation may pose more of a threat to black females than to black males (Carithers, 1970; St. John, 1975). For example, two studies suggest that desegregation may benefit the self-esteem of black males while leaving that of black females unaffected (Denmark, 1970; Powell & Fuller, 1970). Similarly, Armor (1967) found that the desire to go to college is greater in black males with strong academic skills who attend desegregated schools than it is for their segregated counterparts. However, he also found that black females who attend segregated schools show stronger college aspirations than desegregated black females. It is often suggested that black males may be able to gain status in an interracial school through excelling in athletics whereas black girls are in a disadvantaged position in an interracial school when feminine beauty is judged by white standards as frequently appears to be the case.

Although there is not much research on the differential impact of desegregation on the self-image, aspirations, or self-confidence of white males and females, research occasionally suggests white males have a harder time than white females adjusting to desegregation (St. John, 1975). The explanation for this finding follows the same logic as the explanation for the differential impact of desegregation on black girls and boys. Specifically, white boys' ability to gain status through athletics may be undermined by competition from black boys whereas white girls' status may be enhanced by their ability to attract both white and black boys (St. John, 1975).

Although there have been some studies which examine the differential effects of desegregation on the aspirations and self-esteem of males and females there has been almost no study of whether black and white students' assessments

of their experiences in desegregated schools are influenced by their sex. Indeed, with rare exceptions, the literature is barren of studies which examine how students in desegregated schools feel about their experiences (Schofield, Shaeffer, & Hopkins, 1977; Williams & Vendetti, 1969). Yet, such information is vital since one would expect students' reactions to their schools to have a major impact on their decisions about whether to stay in school and whether to pursue further education. The study reported here explores the reactions of black and white students to several aspects of their experiences during their first year in a desegregated school. Given the general agreement in the literature that black girls and white boys have a harder time adjusting to desegregated schools, it was hypothesized that these students would judge the school and their experiences in it less favorably than black boys and white girls.

METHOD

The School

Wexler Middle School (a pseudonym) serves 1600 students in grades six through eight. Although the school is desegregated with a 2/1 black/white ratio in the grade studied, its students come almost without exception from segregated elementary schools. The white students typically come from middle- or upper-middle-class homes. The majority of the black students are from working-or lower-class homes. The school's unusual efforts to provide an ideal environment for interracial education which have been documented elsewhere (Schofield, 1977) are illustrated by its staffing pattern. The top four administrative posts are evenly divided between blacks and whites. Similarly,

each grade has two counselors, one white and one black. About 25% of the faculty are black. Commitment to positive intergroup relations is also shown in the school's support of an extensive program of activities specifically designed to help students to get to know one another. For example, twice a week students have special classes whose stated purpose is to help them come to understand themselves and each other.

Subject Selection

The school divided students into classes essentially randomly within quotas designed to insure racial and sexual balance. Participants in this study were randomly selected within racial and sexual quotas from sixth grade classes which were being observed as part of a study of interaction patterns between black and white students. Twenty sixth graders, ten blacks and ten whites, were interviewed for this study. Two children in the initial sample were replaced when their parents refused to let them be interviewed.

Procedures

Interviews were conducted during the school day in private conference rooms. Black students were interviewed by a black female and white students by a white female. The interviewers stressed that they were from a local university and not connected in any way with the school. Students were assured that their responses would be treated as confidential.

The first interviews were conducted during the first semester of school and the second interviews were held in June at the end of the school year. The questions asked are shown in Table 1. Each question was accompanied by a card with a 21 point continuum on it ranging from -10 to +10. The continuum was

labeled at five points (-10, -5, 0, +5, +10). The neutral point on these continua was zero with positive numbers indicating a positive reaction to the school and negative numbers indicating a negative reaction. So, for example, the response continuum for the question "How good a school do you think Wexler is" was labeled "extremely good" at +10, "pretty good" at +5, "just OK" at 0, "pretty bad" at -5, and "extremely bad" at -10. Questions which asked about how often things occurred had the same 21 point response continua labelled from +10 "all the time" to -10 "never". The students were instructed to choose the number that best reflected their responses. They were permitted to choose numbers falling between the five labelled points if they so desired.

Data Analysis

A 2 x 2 factorial repeated measures analysis of variance was performed on responses to each of the questions shown in Table 1. (Race and sex were fully crossed with 5 individuals in each cell). For brevity's sake, in this summary, the only F's shown are those which reach statistical significance.

RESULTS

As Table 1 shows, the predicted interaction of race and sex occurred in students' answers to all seven questions about their reactions to their school and their peers. Examination of the means associated with these interactions shows that in each case black males reacted more positively to the school than black females whereas white males reacted less positively than white females.

Overall, students were very positive about the school. On the questions about personal reactions to the school (how happy, etc.) and relations between students (how friendly, etc.), only one of the 28 means in Table 1 is below

the zero neutral point. Interestingly, students' initial impressions of the school were almost identical to their reactions after a full year's experience. The repeated measures factor, time, produced neither main effects nor interactions with any of the variables studied.

The two main effects for race, which were not predicted, suggest that even though the white children are in a clear minority in the school, they perceive relations between students as somewhat better than do the blacks. As Table 1 shows, the white children say that students get along better and that they are friendlier than do their black counterparts. Examination of the responses to the remaining five questions also shows that in every case the average response of white children was somewhat more positive than that of the black children although these trends are not statistically significant. Further interviews are now being conducted in order to determine whether this unpredicted tendency is robust and, if so, to determine factors which might account for it.

DISCUSSION

The data show that the first year of desegregation which is often full of turmoil and strife can under favorable circumstances provide a positive social experience for both black and white children. However, they also provide clear evidence that the experience is more positive for black boys than for black girls as well as being more positive for white girls than for white boys. The strength and consistency of the findings suggest a need for more research to discover whether the highly speculative explanations generally offered to explain the pattern of results is indeed supported by empirical

evidence. In addition, the data suggest that interracial schools might be well advised to pay close attention to the very different impact they may have on different groups of students.

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Table 1

White and Black Students' Reactions to
Wexler Middle School and Its Student Body

Item	Group Means: Black Males	Black Females	White Males	White Females	Significant Main Effects and Interactions	F's
1. How do you feel about coming to Wexler?	6.4	2.1	3.8	6.8	Race x Sex	17.5**
2. How good a school do you think Wexler is?	6.4	1.6	5.5	7.4	Race x Sex	6.2*
3. How happy are you here compared to your old school?	5.8	1.3	5.4	6.4	Race x Sex	5.2*
4. How friendly would you say students are at Wexler?	4.8	.9	3.5	6.2	Race Race x Sex	6.6* 18.6*
5. How well behaved do you think students are at Wexler?	2.4	-2.3	1.5	2.9	Race x Sex	7.5*
6. How well do students get along at Wexler?	4.1	.1	4.7	5.7	Race Race x Sex	14.6* 9.6*
7. How often do students help each other when they have problems with their class-work?	5.7	.3	3.9	7.4	Race x Sex	7.2*

*p $\angle$ .05
**p $\angle$ .001